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ABSTRACT

The League of Women Voters of Richardson, Texas, studied child care in their community. The focus of the 3-year study was three-fold: availability, quality, and affordability. The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, all licensed child care centers and preschools in the city were visited by trained teams of observers who completed a checklist on each center and asked center directors to complete a survey instrument requesting specific information about their centers. In the second phase, users of child care services were surveyed by telephone concerning their perceptions of child care in Richardson. Findings revealed a disparity between the child care centers and the preschools in the areas of worker training and curriculum. The absence of programs for low-income families underlined a great disparity in access to programs serving children who lived near or below the poverty level. (RH)

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ABSTRACT

A Study of Child Care in Richardson, Texas. Thomason, Nita
April, 1989

The League of Women Voters of Richardson, Texas studied child care in their community. The focus of the three-year study was three-fold - availability, quality, and affordability. League members approached the issue of child care from two directions. First, they studied all the licensed child care centers and preschools within the city limits by visiting each center in trained teams of two. The observers completed a check list on each center. Center directors were asked to complete a survey giving specific information about their center. The two instruments were used to analyze the child care providers. The second phase of the study focused on the user. The League membership conducted a scientifically-sound telephone survey of the Richardson population concerning their perceptions of child care in Richardson.

Since most of the research on child care has been conducted in high quality centers often associated with universities, this study presents useful information because it considers all the centers within a particular community. A noticeable disparity existed between the child care centers and the preschools in the areas of worker training and curriculum. The total absence of programs for low-income families underlined the great disparity in access to programs serving children who are living near or below the poverty level.

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A Study of Child Care in Richardson, Texas

Introduction

With more mothers of young children entering the work force, increasing numbers of single-parent families, and alarming increases in the number of women and children living in poverty, child care is becoming a critical issue in many communities. As parents make decisions about the best care for their children, affordability, availability, and quality are all important considerations. Since the importance of the early years in the development of young children is unquestioned, having safe, reliable, affordable, quality child care available for all children who need it is a primary need within American society.

History

Child care in the United States has developed sporadically in response to economic and societal pressures. Traditionally, child care has been viewed as a family, not a public, responsibility. Two crisis periods in United States history led to the initial intervention of the federal government into involvement in child care. In the 1930's, as a response to the Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded several nursery school projects. This program lasted only a short time. Then in 1942, the Lanham Act of World War II provided federal funds to serve children whose parents were involved in wartime industry.

After the war, this federal funding for child care ended.

(3)

In the 1960's, in response to the growing number of single mothers living in poverty, limited funds supporting day care programs again became available. Project Head Start and Aid to Families with Dependent Children provided minimal amounts of support for some of America's poor. (1) In 1971, a White House Conference on Children targeted day care as the most serious problem for the American family. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 was proposed to address this problem; but, it was vetoed by President Richard Nixon.

In 1971, a federal tax credit for child care expenses was first allowed. Most of these benefits go to the middle class. Low income families receive some assistance from Title IV-A of the Social Security Act and Title XX. (3)

The number of mothers in the work force has increased dramatically in the past twenty years. Economic necessity, as well as, more and more women choosing careers outside the home have led to increasing needs for quality child care services. A comprehensive federal child care bill, the Act for Better Child Care, as well as, numerous other child care bills including Bush's tax credit legislation are before the federal legislature in 1989. Certainly the child care issue has reached crisis proportions. Understanding the critical nature of this issue, the League of Women Voters of Richardson, Texas chose child care as a local study in 1983.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this comprehensive three-year study of child care was three-fold - availability of child care in Richardson, quality of child care in Richardson, and local regulation.

Procedures for Collection of Data

Richardson is a northern Dallas suburban community with a population of 80,000. It is noted for excellent schools and a generally high standard of living. The reported household median annual income was \$45,000 when the study was conducted.

League members approached the issue of child care from two basic directions. First, they studied all the licensed child care centers and preschools within the city limits. In teams of two, members visited each facility completing a check list as they observed each program. Center directors were asked to complete another survey form giving specific information about their center. The two instruments were used to analyze the child care providers. The second phase of the study focused on the user. The League membership conducted a scientifically-sound telephone survey of the Richardson population concerning their perceptions of child care in Richardson.

Findings

Of the twenty-eight licensed day care centers and preschools in Richardson, the League received completed questionnaires from twenty-six of the centers and preschools. The surveys reported that thirteen centers offered infant care. Twenty centers offered preschool care. Fourteen centers offered before and/or after school care. Three centers had handicapped children enrolled and three more indicated that they were prepared to offer care for handicapped children. Two centers provided evening care. Two centers provided weekend care. Fulltime child care centers opened at 6:30 a.m. or 7:00 a.m. and closed at 6:00 p.m. or 6:30 p.m. At that time many Richardson centers were considerably below capacity enrollment.

Weekly fees for full day infant care ranged from \$68-\$85 with the average cost of infant care \$76 per week. Full day care for preschoolers ranged from \$45 to \$99 per week with the average fee of \$61. Before and after school care costs ranged from \$20 to \$60 per week with the average weekly cost of \$35. Evening care costs reported were \$1.50 per hour. Parttime preschool fee structures for two-day morning classes ranged from \$48-\$85 per month. The average cost for a two-day preschool class was \$57 per month. Three-day preschool classes cost from \$60-\$130 with an average fee of \$76. Five day morning programs cost from \$80

to \$175 per month with an average of \$107. One day Mother's Day Out programs ranged from \$30 to \$45 per month.

A noticeable disparity was observed between the educational levels of the workers in the child care centers and the preschools. 36% of the full-time child care workers had college degrees whereas 50% of the preschool workers had college degrees.

Between November of 1986 and January of 1987 League of Women Voter members, usually in teams of two, visited twenty-seven of the twenty-eight child care centers and preschools in the city of Richardson. Members made observations completing a check list on each center visited. The visits were arranged at times agreeable to the center directors.

No safety hazards were observed at fifteen of the centers. Safety hazards were noted at ten of the centers. These included a broken swing on the playground, an unlatched alley gate on the playground, open electric plugs, insulation hanging out of the ceiling, and babies left unattended in pitch dark rooms with doors shut. In one center, fifteen infants were under the care of one adult.

Twenty three centers were described from good to excellent as far as sanitary conditions were concerned. There were some unsatisfactory situations noted such as: food left uncovered, tooth brushes left out, cluttered kitchen, kitchen smelled like sour milk and lights out in bathroom.

Many activities were going on during the school visits depending to a great extent on the time of day of the visits. The activities ranged from sitting and doing nothing to a wide selection of both child-initiated and teacher-directed activities.

The amount of equipment varied greatly in the different centers. Five centers were noticeably lacking in equipment. Soft elements were found in eighteen centers, private areas in eleven, seven had water play, nine had sand play, twenty-five had books, twenty-four had art centers, twenty-three had small manipulatives, twenty had large motor equipment and eight had animals. As far as center outdoor equipment, League members observed fourteen with sand equipment, thirteen had hard areas for riding toys, fifteen had shade, twenty-four had climbing equipment, twelve had grassy areas, nineteen had digging space, and twenty-two had balancing equipment. Additional equipment was available in some centers including big indoor space for riding toys, big muscle rooms for rainy days, Montessori equipment, computers, and aquariums.

A wide variety of interactions were observed between adults and children. Some centers had many different activities occurring simultaneously - food, painting, puzzles, small toys. Children in some centers seemed to be having a lot of fun and laughing. However, in other centers the interactions were minimal. For example, in one center children were not allowed to speak during meal time and in

another center children were sitting around an empty table literally twiddling their thumbs.

The child care telephone survey was conducted between October 18 and October 23, 1987. The random sample included 546 households. 338 calls were completed. Survey results showed that 21% of the population had paid for child care other than occasional babysitting in the past five years. 55% had no impression of the child care services in Richardson. Of the 151 who expressed an opinion about child care services, 49% rated the services as very good or excellent while 51% rated them as average or lower. The primary consideration for selecting a center was the staff. Facilities and program were also mentioned as key considerations. The three top elements of "quality care" were named as worker training, curriculum, and adult-child interaction. 16.9% of the population were aware of unmet child care needs in Richardson.

53.8% of the population were willing to pay taxes to assure higher quality child care. 60.1% were willing to pay taxes to subsidize child care for lower income families. 63.6% favored more regulation of child care centers. 3/4 of these 215 felt such regulation should be at the local or state level. Only 3% of these felt such regulation should be at the federal level. 75.7% favored regulation of day care provided at an individual's home. 4/5 of these felt such regulation should be at the local or state level.

Respondents reported an average of slightly over two adults per household. 2/3 of these held a fulltime wage-earning job. 45.9% of the households had children eighteen years or younger. 18.9% had children in the 0-5 years age group, 22.5% had children in the 6-11 years age group and 20.7% had children in the 12-18 years age group. The median reported age of the respondents was about 42 years. The median reported household income was about \$45,000 per year.

Procedures for League Study

Reaching member agreement is the goal of League study and a requirement before taking action. Careful and deliberate study of the issues prepare the membership to reach member agreement successfully. The study committee develops good consensus questions which form the basis for the league position. A series of meetings and background papers were given to the membership throughout the three-year process.

Position

The following local position on child care in Richardson was adopted:

The League of Women Voters of Richardson believes that safe, reliable, affordable, quality child care should be available for every child in Richardson.

We support the following principles:

1. Improve access to quality child care for all families;
2. Aid low-and moderate-income parents in paying for such care;
3. Provide for sliding fee scales to help facilitate the socio-economic mix of children within child care facilities;
4. Strengthen child care standards and improve their implementation;
5. Strengthen family day care as well as center care;
6. Support parental involvement in child care;
7. Support the development of training programs to ensure qualified staff in child care programs;
8. Encourage coordination among the various state and local agencies that affect young children and their families;
9. Provide sufficient funds to serve more children, assure quality, and improve the level of compensation for child care workers.

We support: Utilization of federal and state tax funds to achieve higher quality child care and to subsidize child care for lower income families.

We support: Utilization of PISD and RISD physical facilities for activities related to child care such as: on-site care of school age children before and after school, developmentally appropriate educational programs for 3-5

year old children, and adult education classes for parents and child care workers.

Action

When the League of Women Voters reaches agreement on a clearly stated position enthusiastically supported by its members, the members become effective advocates for the changes they may ultimately recommend. Since the Richardson League adopted its child care position, the membership has taken action on child care issues both directly and indirectly. A local child care ordinance to tighten minimum standards for family day homes was passed in Richardson. The League was able to provide research materials to the elected officials and the city staff making the decisions. The local league also proposed Child Care as the League of Women Voters Texas state study item and campaigned statewide for its passage. Child Care was chosen as the League of Women Voters-Texas state study for 1989-1991. Since the primary implementation of child care programs is administered at the state level this is a very appropriate and timely thrust. States need to address the issues of child care, particularly standards of quality, affordability, and availability.

Implications

Since most of the research on child care has been conducted in high quality centers often associated with

universities, (5) this study presents useful information because it considers all the centers within a particular community. As the child care centers and preschools were visited by trained observers, several patterns emerged. A noticeable disparity existed between the child care centers and the preschools. One difference was the level of education of the workers. 50% of the preschool workers had college degrees while only 36% of the fulltime child care workers had college degrees. Another difference observed was a differing curricular emphasis. 14 of 16 of the child care centers utilized worksheets whereas only 6 of 11 of the preschools used worksheets as a teaching material.

Varying philosophies were evident with some of the centers and preschools viewing children as active learners while others placed more emphasis on structured programs with a more academic focus. A wide variety of interactions between adults and children were observed, as noted in the findings. Many of the environments appeared to be positive, nurturing, and child-centered. However, several of the child care environments caused the observers to express grave concern. For example, the center having fifteen infants with one care provider, which was a gross violation of minimum standards, also had children napping in pitch dark rooms with closed doors and no adults present. The regimented meal time during which the adult provider never spoke to the children was another example of a less-than-quality environment for young children.

The willingness of the Richardson population to pay taxes to assure higher quality child care and to subsidize child care for lower income families is indicative of the growing concerns among the general population about the whole child care issue.

Conclusions

The findings of this study on child care in a Texas suburban community highlight concerns about child care issues of a far broader scope. A number of important considerations are brought to focus from this study. The disparity between the child care centers and the preschools emphasizes the care versus education issue.(2) Historically, child care has been associated with custodial care and grew out of adult needs. Early childhood education programs focus on providing comprehensive services emphasizing wholistic development and developmentally appropriate practice. In the everyday world, the children who are in care all day are in programs which are often inferior in quality. The morning-only preschool programs are often of higher quality. The National Day Care Study found that only one teacher characteristic predicts program quality and effectiveness: the amount of job-related training in early childhood education that a teacher has received. (6) Since the study found that preschool teachers had a higher level of education than the day care workers,

this too, underlines the disparity between care and education. (5)

Finally, the total absence of programs for low income families underlines the great disparity in access to programs serving children who are living near or below the poverty level. (2) Although Richardson is a middle class community there are families who need financial assistance in providing child care for their young children. There is no viable option for these families in Richardson. Since research shows that quality early childhood programs help prevent school failure among the children of the poor, this noticeable void in programming needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

As a result of this comprehensive study on child care in Richardson and the position statement developed and adopted by the local League membership, the League of Women Voters of Richardson, Texas is in a position to address child care issues in their community. Community groups such as the League of Women Voters must join with early childhood professionals as advocates for quality, affordability, and availability in child care if this critical societal issue is to be adequately addressed.

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